SPECIAL FEATURE SECTION.

New York Tribune

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The Tribune Roster of a Former Day

Prof. Matthews Pictures the Glories of a Local Room That Had Daniel Frohman for Its Office Boy, Bronson Howard for Its Exchange Editor, and Henry James, William Winter, John Hay, Bayard Taylor and Whitelaw Reid on a Staff Conspicuous as Having Reached the High Water Mark of Ability: A Brief for the "Good Old Days" of a Literary Journalism.

HENRY JAMES.

WILLIAM WINTER.

By Brander Matthews.

WHEN we have climbed the triple hill of three-score years and find ourselves advancing steadily up the gentle incline which is taking us to the lofty height of three-score and ten, we are almost irresistibly impelled to exaggerate the roseate hues of the distant slopes we have ascended. We are tempted to believe that when we ourselves were in the first flush of youth, the sunsets were more gorgeous than they are now, the women more beautiful and the men nobler. This is the inevitable mirage of advancing years; and it is as misleading as any other optical illusion. We need to keep reminding ourselves that the telegraph poles are not really closer together the further off they are; and that, after all, the past was not actually superior to the present. There is wisdom as well as wit in the fabled retort to the assertion that "'Punch' is not now what it used to be" to the effect that as a matter of fact "it never was!"

Charles Lamb declared that it was to him a consolation for growing old that he had been born early enough to see the "School for Scandal" in all the glory of the original performance by the incomparable company at Drury Lane Theatre, the unequalled gathering of comedians which Richard Brinsley Sheridan had inherited from David Garrick. And to-day old playgoers are wont to declare that there are no performances in our theatres nowadays so brilliant and so completely satisfactory as those visible in the good old days of the strong stock companies of Lester Wallack and Augustin Daly. It is easy for the aging to be praisers of past times; but what is easy is not always wise. An old playgoer whose memory is not unduly affected by the mirage of age must admit (if he is honest with himself) that many of the performances of the stock companies at Wallack's and Daly's were ragged and careless. He must recognize the indisputable fact that although many of our latter-day performances are unsatisfactory the standard of production is now higher than ever before.

Those of us who have lived in New York for half a century and who have loved it with increasing devotion as we have been spectators of its stupendous expansion, may regret the comparative quiet of the mid-years of the nineteenth century and may discover now and again conditions not as congenial as they used to be. On the other hand, we are glad to be able to testify from our own persevering and affectionate observation that there has been steady improvement all through these many years. New York is a cleaner city, morally as well as physically; it is a safer and healthier city; it is a more beautiful city and a city far pleasanter to dwell in. Above all, it is a more interesting city, more various in its activities, more stimulating, richer in opportunity for social improvement and for aesthetic enjoyment.

This much by way of prelude, to make it plain that the present writer holds no brief for the past against the present and that he is not about to make a special plea for the mythical "good old days" to which the aging are often tempted to look back longingly and regretfully. And this once made plain, the way is open to the assertion that the New York newspapers of to-day, many as are their merits, do not in certain other aspects, measure up to the standard set by the New York newspapers of forty years ago. I may hold this opinion now, because I was a very young man in those days, because I was an impressionable reader of half a dozen journals, morning and evening, but I cannot help believing that it was in the early seventies that New York journalism touched its high water mark—possibly not in newsgathering and in the display of news, but certainly in criticism, in correspondence and in the editorial interpretation of the events of the day.

OLD MASTERS IN JOURNALISM.

Among the New York dailies The Tribune was then conspicuous for the diversified ability of its staff. It had proved itself superior to its rivals in the skill with which it had been able to report all the events of the Franco-German war of 1870, with the later siege of Paris and the subsequent outbreak of the Commune. It had fought valiantly in the ill-fated electoral campaign of 1872 which ended disastrously in the defeat of Horace Greeley, speedily followed by his death. Aided by William Walter Phelps, Whitelaw Reid assumed full control of The Tribune, resolved to repair the injury done to the paper by its advocacy of an unsuccessful candidate. He had for his chief asociate as an editorial writer John Hay, who was specially equipped for the consideration of foreign affairs. Among the other men who gave strength to the editorial page were the incisive Charles T. Congdon, the humorous Isaac H. Bromley, and the genial Noah Brooks, men of high character and of varied attainments. Furthermore, they were united in purpose and harmonious in taste. They took their work seriously, but they did not take themselves too seriously; and they abounded in wit and repartee. The famous jingle, "Punch, brothers, punch; punch with care, punch in the presence of the passenjare," was due to the spontaneous improvization of "Ike" Bromley and Noah Brooks as they rode uptown one afternoon in a Fourth avenue car, and it was first published on the editorial page of The Tribune, where Mark Twain found it and took it as the text of his "Literary Nightmare."

GREAT NAMES ON "THE TRIBUNE" STAFF.

The literary criticism was in the competent and kindly hands of George Ripley, the founder of Brook Farm. The art editor was Clarence Cook. The musical critic was John R. G. Hassard, who was also a frequent contributor to the editorial page. The dramatic critic was William Winter. The exchange editor was Bronson Howard, who had already won his first success as a playwright with his ingeniously complicated farce, "Saratoga." The European exchange editor was Edward L. Burlingame (long afterward to edit "Scribner's Magazine" for a quarter of a century); and another young member of the staff was Clarence Clough Buel (long afterward to become associate editor of the "Century Magazine") And it may be recorded here as added evidence of the distribution of ability in The Tribune office is those distant days that Daniel Frohman was then one of the office boys.

The foremost of The Tribune's foreign correspondents was Bayard Taylor—afterward to be American Minister to Berlin, as his colleague, John Hay, was to go as our Ambassador to London and as Whitelaw Reid was to represent the United States both in Paris and London. Bayard Taylor had a roving commission, holding himself ready to travel and to visit any spot of immediate importance in the eyes of American newspaper readers. The London correspondent was George W. Smalley, and the Paris correspondent was William H. Huntington—who left to the Metropolitan Museum his unrivalled collection of portraits and mementos of Benjamin Franklin. In addition to Huntington's regular letters dealing with French public life, there were fortnightly communications from Arsene Houssaye, who commented on the more frivolous aspects of Parisian society, and from Henry James, who wrote chiefly about French books and plays and pictures.

E. V. Smalley was a correspondent who wandered through the United States describing conditions in parts of the country less well known to New Yorkers than they are now. The Washington correspondent was Z. L. White. From Boston, Louise Chandler Moulton wrote weekly letters upon literary topics, commingled of news and apt comment. Kate Field was an occasional contributor, and so was another spinster, Abigail Dodge, who wrote under the pen-name of "Gail Hamilton," and who published in The Tribune a series of characteristically caustic letters in defence of the spoils system, full of bitter and biting denunciation of the advocates of civil service reform, then a novelty in American politics.

JOURNALISM WAS LITERATURE.

There is always—and there always should be—a gap between literature and journalism, so widely different in their aims; and yet it was a great good fortune for The Tribune of forty years ago that among the hard-working newspaper men on its staff there were at least half a dozen who were to make (or who had already made) honorable reputations as men of letters. One immediate result of the presence of these accomplished writers on the staff of a daily newspaper was that "The Tribune" had a high standard of style. Good writing—not "fine writing," but clear and cogent English—was to be seen on every page and in every department, in the news columns as well as in the editorial articles and in the correspondence.

Another result was that The Tribune then paid especial attention to literature. It made a practice of reporting addresses and lectures almost in full. When Huxley and Tyndall visited the United States, one after the other, The Tribune gave a space to the reports of their lectures far ampler than did any other American newspaper. And even so late as the fall of 1883, when Matthew Arnold delivered his first lecture in New York on "Numbers," The Tribune reported it so amply that General Grant called at the office to thank the editor for having presented the main points of the address. Matthew Arnold records this visit in one of his letters to his sister, Mrs. Forster: "The number of people whom, somehow or other, I reach here is what surprises me," he wrote; and it plainly pleased him as much as it surprised him.

BROWNING PARODIED.

Whenever Bayard Taylor returned from his wanderings to rest for a few months in New York he wrote editorial articles and he undertook a share in the book reviewing. To The Tribune for December 4, 1875, he contributed a metrical criticism of Browning's "Inn Album," then just published, in which he cleverly parodied the manner of the poet whose work he was considering.

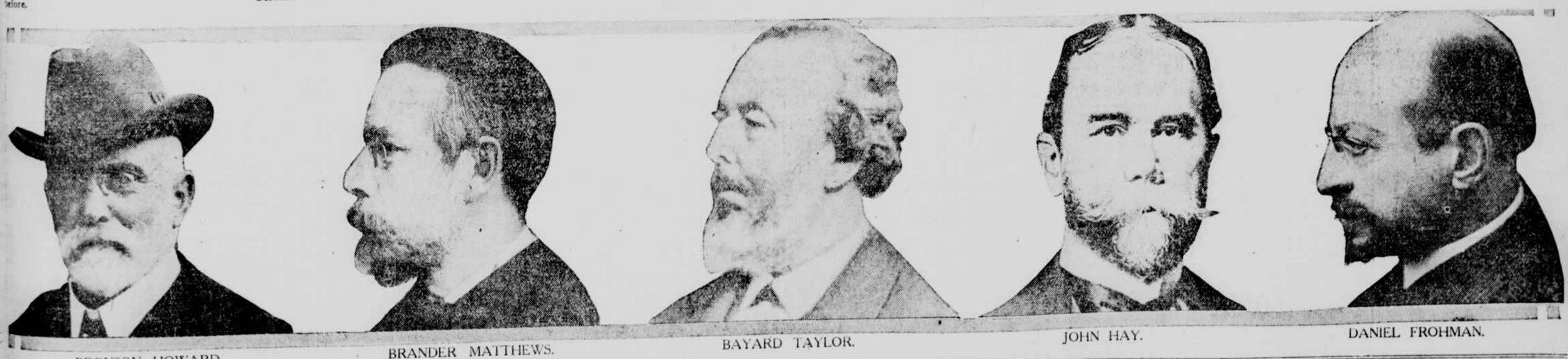
"The Inn Album." By Robert Browning. James R. Osgood & Co.

What's this? A book? 16mo.—Osgood's page.
Fair, clear, Olympian-typed, and save a scant
O' the margin, stiff i' the hurried binding, good!
Intituled how? "'The Inn Album,' Robert Browning, Author." Why should he not say, as well,
The Hotel Register?—cis-Atlantic term!
Nay, an' he should, the action might purvey
To lower comprehensions; so not he!
Reflect, 't is Browning!—he neglects, prepence,
All forms of form: what he gives must we take,
Sweet, bitter, sour, absinthean, adipose,
Conglomerate, jollied, potted salt or dried
As the mood holds him; ours is not to choose!
Well (here huge sighs be heard!) commending us
To Heaven's high mercy let us read!

HAY AND WHITMAN BURLESQUED.

Four years earlier, in September, 1871, Walt Whitman had read a poem at the opening of the annual American Institute fair; and a large part of this rhapsody duly appeared the next morning in The Tribune. Bayard Taylor promptly wrote a parody of Whitman, and three other parodies of Bret Harte's dialect verse, Joaquin Miller's resonant lyrics and of John Hay's vigorously vernacular "Pike County Ballads." He sent them to The Tribune, of course, and John Hay, taking no offence at the broad burlesque of his own stalwart poems, provided a setting of prose to introduce the several contestants in what he entitled the "Battle of the Bards." When Bayard Taylor included these parodies at the end of the volume containing the 'Diversions of the Echo Club" he retained Hay's prose framework, with a prefatory note in which he declared that "the rare liberality—nay, in a literary sense, generosity—which the editor exhibited would be universally appreciated if it were proper to mention his name."

Evidently the bards of The Tribune staff were not embattled, but dwelt together in unity. Evidently also they believed that the readers of the paper in the eighth decade of the nineteenth century were awake to what was going on in the world of letters, and that these readers would relish a pleasant and playful treatment of the more recent manifestations of contemporary poetry, and perhaps it may be doubted whether the editors of any one of the leading papers in New York in this second decade of the twentieth century would be justified in feeling this confidence.



BRONSON HOWARD. BRANDER MATTHEWS. BAYARD TAYLOR. JOHN HAY. DANIEL FROHMAN.

A New Attack on the Problem of the New Theatre

By John Corbin.

HERE is a tragedy or a joke, as you please—or maybe a mere matter of fact, though not without significance. The monumental playhouse which was built to provide America with a counterpart of the Théâtre Française became, after a struggle of only two years, the home of melodramatic spectacle; it tried to come back to the legitimate as the abode of popular opera; and the result is that it now proclaims itself exuberantly as the home of variety entertainment.

To the group of men who spent on the New Theatre three years of generous effort and over three million dollars this new incarnation may well point an ironic disillusionment.

To the cynic, and especially the cynic of Broadway, the occasion is one of laughter. A lot of people from Fifth Avenue undertook to show the professional managers what art is like with a capital A (plus considerable capital of the other sort), and now the once-sacred precincts of society and solvency are invaded by the trained seal and the low comedian.

A third point of view is possible—the point of view of those who see facts as they are and think accordingly. These folk some time ago arrived at a very interesting conclusion. It is this: Under prevailing conditions an art theatre of the first order is not possible.

I do not say that a more purely artistic drama is not possible. I believe that it is not only possible but inevitable, and that even now the manner in which it will come may be foreseen. But I do say that the way to it lies through the existing commercial theatre, not through an act of separate creation. God said, "Let there be light," and, as we are told, the sun rose. When man says, "Let there be art," the natural result is a whirling chaos of absurdity.

Those who want either to enjoy the best, or to help it along, must turn their steps to Broadway. Mahomet must go to the mountain.

Mahomet has gone to the mountain and the name of his chariot is The Drama Society. But of that later. First, let us see how it was that the mountain refused to budge.

The reason for the failure of the New Theatre is very simple. It failed to secure a sufficient supply either of plays or of actors of the first order.

Playwrights who can get a commercial production prefer it. And why should they not? A Broadway success nets the author upward of $30,000—often many times that—whereas a production in repertory tends to kill the run and decimates the author's profits.

A very striking example of this sort of thing occurred last year. Shaw's "Androcles" was by far the most enjoyable play of the season, at least to the more intelligent playgoers. If it had been produced as a separate bill it would doubtless have had a profitable run during the entire season. But it was produced in repertory, alternating with plays that had little attraction for the public. "Androcles" had in all only seventy-nine performances, and, thanks to the expense of the other plays, the result of the season of repertory was a deficit.

As regards actors, the case is much the same. The New Theatre company was, within its limitations, perhaps the most uniformly able in modern memory. But it suffered a very strict limitation in the fact that for the most part it had no leading man or leading woman of the first order. Sothern and Marlowe left after their first production; and though others of rare ability played from time to time they were makeshifts, not regular members of the company. As regular members we could neither afford nor obtain them.

Now there is a very large class of plays that depend for success on the personality and the art of the leading actor. The authors very naturally refused to let us produce them.

On Broadway, meantime, a very different story was unfolding. The best plays from England, France and Germany found their way there, and often in productions of a very high order. Clyde Fitch and Augustus Thomas were producing the work of their ripest maturity. More interesting than all, perhaps, was the fact that a strongly native school of our own was developing. George M. Cohan, Eugene Walter, George Broadhurst, Paul Armstrong, William Vaughan Moody, Percy Mackaye, Edward Sheldon, A. E. Thomas and others of scarcely less note were handling native subjects with keen observation and racy intelligence. It is possible that there were no masterpieces. That is a word that may be safely left to the pedants. But it must be said that a period which gave birth to The Great Divide, The Easiest Way, Paid in Full, Her Husband's Wife and Seven Keys to Baldpate had a vigor and a variety in inspiration that are of the utmost promise.

If the growth was strong, however, it must be said that it was also somewhat rank. Plays that were crudely farcical and melodramatic succeeded most signally; and when the better plays caught the public it was generally because of some element of farce or of vigorous drama rather than because of their finer qualities. The Broadway public was larger than ever before; but by the same token its common denominator was lower. Plays succeeded by virtue of being strong rather than by virtue of being fine; in spite of the note of distinction rather than because of it.

The reason was obvious enough. The intelligent local public had largely ceased to be playgoers. The multiplication of theatres and productions had lowered the average of the output. The public that once frequented Wallack's and Daly's and the old Lyceum, safe in the assurance that it would find some little recompense, at the worst, for the expenditure of the leisure and its money, now found that over half the time an evening spent in the theatre was a total waste. There was the difficulty, too, of getting tickets. The enormous increase of the transient public—of people on errands of business or of pleasure crowded into a brief sojourn—had thrown all the best seats into the agencies. It required always an increased price, and often much time and vexation at the telephone, to get the tickets for those plays that proved, on the whole, so unsatisfying.

The result was first clearly manifest in the story of The Yellow Jacket. That was perhaps the most distinguished, the most refined and delicate product of its decade. The people who delighted in it numbered tens of thousands. If they could have been prevailed on to attend en masse, success would have

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